



*The Family
Learning
Center*

THE FAMILY LEARNING CENTER

I remember a Parents Weekend a few years ago when I was standing in the Mansion talking casually with the mother and father of a third-year student. Our discussion took place during that portion of the weekend schedule that is traditionally reserved for parent-teacher conferences, sessions intended to provide parents with academic progress reports. I asked these parents why they were talking with me instead of their son's French teacher. The mother replied, "How John is doing in French is his problem." I responded, "You can always tell the veteran parents at these weekends. They're the ones who don't care how their kids are doing." This mother had learned that the only progress she could directly affect was her own. Many Hyde parents find this lesson the most difficult of all.

At the outset of our efforts to educate the whole family, we perceived what appears to be an inherent irony. Parents and children generally need to learn opposite lessons: students need to learn how to "hang on" and parents need to learn how to "let go." We repeatedly observe the family dynamic where a student needs to take more responsibility for his or her own life and a parent needs to step out of the way and let son or daughter struggle with the daily burdens of this responsibility. One stereotype of the New England boarding school is that of a place where parents send their children because they don't have time to properly raise them. The antithesis of this is the description I would use if forced to stereotype the Hyde parents. In fact, we often feel compelled to encourage our parents to become less involved in the lives of their children. We try to convince such families that the parents will help their children the most if they will strive to improve the quality of their own lives. After all, we believe that character is better inspired than imparted.

HISTORY

The early Hyde School has been described as a philosophy in search of a curriculum. As the founder, Joe Gauld knew that he wanted to

focus on character and had discovered a number of character-building notions and techniques as a teacher, coach, and administrator. However, he began his school without blueprints. Rounds of discussions with family and friends yielded the five words that to this day adorn the school shield:

COURAGE
INTEGRITY
LEADERSHIP
CURIOSITY
CONCERN

In the early days, every attempt was made to keep these words at the forefront of the community's consciousness. Even the humor of the school was peppered with them. As a result, these five qualities became valued by all and, before long, it appeared that character-based education was indeed alive at Hyde School.

I was a student at Hyde in those early years and it has been truly exciting to watch the school grow. It has been gratifying to observe the many new ideas that have been transformed into programs such as performing arts, the jobs program, community action, and the ropes course. However, as valuable as these programs are, Hyde's major breakthrough has been the involvement of parents in its program — not as “cheerleaders” but as “students” who, like their children, strive to develop their character.

In the mid-70's, Gauld and other teachers took an inventory of the first decade of the Hyde experiment. The results were encouraging, with evidence that Hyde had made a positive contribution to the lives of its students. One conclusion came as a bit of a surprise: there seemed to be a correlation between the involvement of parents and the success of students. Those parents who tried to develop their own courage, integrity, leadership, curiosity, and concern tended to have children who acted likewise. Thus, the school began to examine ways to nurture this correlation.

In the late '70s, a questionnaire was distributed to the student body. One of the questions asked, “If you had a very serious life problem (e.g., teenage pregnancy), who would you go to for advice?” The question was followed by multiple choices: (a) friend; (b) Hyde teacher; (c) parent; or (d) minister. The collective response was a telling one: more students selected (b) Hyde teacher than (c) Mom or Dad. Initially, the faculty was flattered by this indication of trust. The response did demonstrate that the faculty was effectively carrying out the mission of the school, but the faculty was also troubled by the response. As with all boarding schools, Hyde faculty sought to play a parenting role to the students. However, the teachers did not want to replace the parents on any sort of permanent basis. Sometimes teachers must function as a parent, but such a function should be performed in extenuating circumstances (e.g., divorce, parental death, or illness) and not because a school's program freezes students' parents out of the picture. The questionnaire showed the faculty that they had gotten so close to their students that the parents had begun to play the “third wheel” on a date. Hyde faculty had long been trained to model the behavior that the school sought to inspire in its students. The students' responses on the questionnaire indicated that it may be more important to encourage the parents to model that same behavior. Thus, every effort would be made to pull the parents into the process.

The same trial-and-error approach that Joe Gauld and the faculty originally applied to the students was applied to the parents. The first evidence of a change in emphasis occurred during Parents Weekends. These weekends were transformed from the traditional boarding school affair of teacher conferences, Headmaster's reception, and football game to working weekends consisting of family seminars and the writing of personal goals papers. As the geographical diversity of Hyde's student body increased, parent regions were established throughout the country. (Today there are more than 20 regions from Maine to Florida to Texas to California.) These regions began to meet monthly and expanded their efforts to include performing arts and community action projects. It soon became apparent that this new emphasis would require a formal

curriculum; the Family Learning Center (FLC) was in full operation by 1980. Today the FLC has a full-time staff that supervises Parents Weekends and regional activities, and facilitates the three-day sessions on campus that parents experience each year.

A TYPICAL YEARLY PLAN - What to Expect

Hyde parents are challenged by a rigorous program. The expectations for a typical year include:

- Two Parents Weekends (October and April)
- One Family Learning Center session per year
(This is a three-day program:
Thursday PM through Sunday AM or
Sunday PM through Wednesday AM)
- Monthly Regional Meetings
(One of these is typically a weekend retreat.)

Parents Weekends

Hyde has a simple membership requirement. Students, teachers, and parents are expected to honestly and openly address three questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I going with my life?
3. How do I get there?

These three questions form the cornerstone of the admissions interview. Solid admissions candidates are those families who seek to explore these questions with enterprising curiosity. Sometimes parents are surprised to discover that they are expected to participate in the interview, to address their personal issues as earnestly as their children are expected to address them. Parents Weekends are the two times of the year when the entire community assembles to address these personal issues. Typically, there are three seminar

sessions (two to three hours each) with groups that contain from five to eight families. Sometimes these groups are randomly selected and sometimes they meet in regional groups. We apply what we call the three R's of seminars: raise, wrestle, and resolve. In the first seminar session, the issues within the family are **raised**. The second session will find family members **wrestling** with these issues. On the final day, there is an attempt to **resolve** the issues by establishing an action plan for the future. Issues or themes that families have examined in the past include communication, truth vs. harmony, and private self vs. public self. Sometimes family members will examine themselves in light of one of the Five Words or Five Principles.

The weekend includes team- and family-building exercises. There are opportunities for teacher conferences and workshops on a variety of topics including college placement, health, and admissions. The highlight of the Spring Weekend is the parent shows. Each family region performs a five- to ten-minute production viewed by the entire Hyde community. One weekend, a region showed slides of its work on a Habitat for Humanity project; another region showed slides of a day that its members spent on an outing at a high ropes course. The parent shows encourage all participants to "take a risk and have fun." These exercises have a profound effect on students, exemplifying the school's belief that character is better inspired than imparted. It bolsters the resolve of a son or daughter to see Mom and/or Dad struggling with some of the challenges that Hyde students face on a daily basis. The weekend traditionally concludes with a community meeting in the Student Union.

Family Learning Center

While the Parents Weekend has a focus on the community as a whole, the FLC is intended to focus more specifically on each family as an individual working unit. A family chooses a session from a possible list of more than twenty dates. (Preference is given to long distance families for sessions that immediately precede or follow a Parents Weekend.) Typically, seven to twelve families will attend any given

three-day session. The FLC offers the family the opportunity to focus its goals and to assess progress in meeting them. There are four goals and objectives that parents write about on the first day:

1. To better understand how my family operates.
2. To identify specifically what I can do to improve both the quality and effectiveness of our family life.
3. To gain a better understanding of myself, my own needs, and my own sense of purpose in life.
4. To identify specifically what I can do to improve the quality and effectiveness of my life.

The dynamics of the action-reflection cycle permeate the FLC (see The Hyde Concepts brochure entitled, "Hyde School's Action-Reflection Cycle"). There are seminars, some with parents and children together and some where they are apart. There is journaling and the Meyers-Briggs test is taken and analyzed. There is an exercise called the "beach walk" that parents and children do together on a beautiful Maine beach. The program concludes with the reading of personal papers on the final morning.

Monthly Regional Meetings

The Hyde regional network includes more than twenty different regions. Large metropolitan areas have been divided into smaller regions (e.g., New York has been divided into four regions: Manhattan, Long Island, Northern Jersey, Connecticut-Westchester). The Heartland region covers a wide area of the Midwest with a more scattered population; there are smaller regions in Vermont and Atlanta. We have learned that five to six families can constitute an effective region. The group's purpose is to function as a coach and a support group for parents. The regional group is to the parents what the challenge team or class curricula team is to the students.

Effective regions often develop lasting bonds of friendship and loyalty. Some have reunions and alumni regional groups are beginning to evolve in some areas.

The regional groups meet once a month for about four hours. Most regions rotate the location of the meetings among the homes of their members. Members facilitate their own meetings and typically include themes and exercises established by the FLC staff on campus. Typical agenda items include a seminar, journaling, or perhaps worksheet exercises provided by the FLC. Time is also set aside for rehearsal of the spring shows. In the winter, each region conducts a weekend retreat that is facilitated by trained Hyde faculty. Regions also assist the school in its admissions and development efforts. Many regions occasionally conduct admissions "teas" where prospective admissions families are invited to talk with parents and Hyde faculty members about the school.

The regions also assist parents in their efforts to "bring Hyde home" during school vacations. It is not uncommon for Hyde families to keep the school shield and the Five Principles posted on the refrigerator door in the family kitchen. It is essential that students' vacations represent a continuation, not an interruption, of their Hyde educations. The region offers a structure to help support this objective.

CONCLUSION

In our college placement role, we always impress upon the seniors that what they get out of college will be determined by what they put into it. A student who gets into a first-choice school is not necessarily better off than another student who reluctantly enrolls at a "fall-back" school. The true value of the education for both students will be determined after they matriculate and classes begin. The same reasoning applies to the Hyde family program. The letter and spirit of the program must be honored in order to receive maximum benefit. With this in mind, Hyde parents have adopted "A Creed of Parent

Commitment” as a means to help all Hyde parents derive that maximum benefit and pursue their unique potentials.

A Creed of Parent Commitment

1. I will be honest with myself and with others.
If I don't tell someone what my feelings are,
I'm cheating them.
2. I will re-evaluate the purpose of my life and
continuously examine my moral and spiritual
values and share them with others.
3. Character growth in my children closely follows
my own.
4. I will demand the best of myself, my children,
my spouse, and other parents.
5. I will let go of my children so that they may seek
their own growth and goals and learn to manage
their own lives according to their best values.
6. I will listen to my children and be guided by their
best qualities.
7. I will listen to the evaluation of my growth by
other parents, faculty, and students.
8. I will educate other parents as well as myself.

Malcolm W. Gauld
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